

## **Promenade [Zoom] presentation for Village Laguna**

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A few weeks ago I reviewed the City's recent "Request for Proposal" [RFP] for the design of the proposed pedestrian mall on lower Forest Avenue. The proposals from the consultants were due back to the City on March 12 for evaluation and selection of the preferred consultant team. From reports in the press, I believe that the target date for selection of a consultant is some time in mid April, just a few weeks away.

I was concerned about this RFP because I thought it was too focused on preparing a detailed design and applying for permits...rather than facilitating an open and transparent process for determining the project goals. The most current planning in the 2019 Downtown Action Plan for lower Forest shows slightly widened sidewalks, enhanced paving, and new street trees, but the parking and vehicular access are preserved. Then COVID hit in early 2020, and in June the Promenade was constructed to temporarily assist lower Forest businesses, especially the restaurants. Six months later, this past January, the Council directed staff to select a planning consultant to prepare a design to permanently close the street. After only a 6 month "trial period", with some COVID restrictions in place and the art festivals cancelled last summer, it is hard to justify removing 48 parking spaces and vehicular access in the heart of downtown without clear knowledge and hard data of the street closure effects on all of the existing businesses, as well as other potential impacts. Some of these impacts, such as traffic flow and parking removal, cannot be known until the Festivals are fully functioning. If a consultant were to be hired next month, in my opinion it should be to help determine what type of long term solution is best for businesses and the public...rather than rushing to prepare a new design and getting permits. There are way too many variables and unknowns at this stage to begin designing.

For a project of this magnitude and significance I support a confidential poll of lower Forest businesses and a city-wide resident survey into what are the best objectives for our historic “main street”, which has existed intact for over 100 years. I’m not saying that a pedestrian mall for lower Forest is a bad idea, but it is certainly a major change, and we need to be sure that we have considered all options before embarking on a change that is so significant. If professional and impartial polling indicates that the affected businesses and the majority of the residents are in favor of funding a permanent street closure, then further planning and design should proceed.

I think that rather than jump ahead to final designs, we should go back to Square One to make sure we have not overlooked other options. For instance: it is assumed that the Promenade supporters’ objective is to create a lively and activated downtown pedestrian experience, filled with public art and places for music and gathering... presumably without damaging any of the existing businesses. These are good objectives, and there are many ways to achieve them.

The former bus depot on Ocean Avenue now has 14 new parking spaces, and the potential “Park Place” street end parklet below the library has 8 parking spaces. Unless I’m missing something, the City could convert either [or both] of those locations into “people places” by removing the cars and creating permanent space for public art, gatherings and music. Removing the total of 22 parking spaces from these two locations would allow the 48 spaces on lower Forest to remain and serve the high concentration of businesses on lower Forest as they always have.

As recommended by the Downtown Action Plan, and long supported by many residents including myself, lower Forest could have retractable bollards installed to create a pedestrian-only zone for special events like our Hospitality Night in December. And the festival string lights which now look so great could stay permanently to identify this periodic “special events zone”.

San Luis Obispo, with one of the most charming and vibrant downtowns in California, has held a great downtown Street Fair/ Farmer’s Market every Thursday night from 6 to 9 pm for over 40 years. I have been there many times. It is held on their main downtown street, Higuera Avenue, which is temporarily

closed on Thursdays at 5 pm to set up the party. You can buy hot tamales, crepes, falafels, BBQ and all types of food from local restaurants from pop-up tents, and it's affordable for everyone. Street food for a street party. There are musicians, dancers, and performance artists.... family friendly and inclusive for all ages. The businesses on Higuera can remain open late if it's profitable for them, or they can close at 6 and go home, or join the party. And every Friday morning the street returns to normal for business...with pedestrians on sidewalks, vehicular traffic, deliveries, and parking intact. A fun street party every week with no side effects. San Luis Obispo is a lively and youthful college town, and a once-a-week party might be ambitious for Laguna...but it seems like a once or twice a month schedule could work. If Laguna's party was half as fun as San Luis Obispo's, I know I'd be there. It's the perfect venue to connect with friends and neighbors.

Closing off primary streets in downtown areas to create pedestrian-only zones to promote business was an urban planning experiment in over 200 American cities in the 1960's. During this period, traditional downtowns were declining due to new postwar suburban shopping centers with pedestrian-friendly amenities and ample parking. Internationally famous architects such as Victor Gruen, landscape architects such as Garrett Eckbo, and noted public artists were hired by cities to design the downtown street malls...thinking that creating beautiful car-free downtown plazas would automatically bring back people and business to the downtowns. But the former downtown ingredients of concentrated street activity from cars and pedestrians, storefront visibility, and street parking were missing. By the year 2000 it is estimated that only 24 of those 200 + pedestrian-only downtown zones remained. The other 85-90% converted back to traditional streets to revive their business communities. Of course, Laguna is different, but some of the commercial impacts are common. Each specific project had its own set of issues, but the point is: simply closing off streets to vehicles did not guarantee commercial success.

The Fulton Mall in Fresno, 1964, was 6 blocks long and did not achieve commercial expectations. In 2013 the City spent \$16 million to convert it back to its original street layout. Other downtown mall conversions in California, like the Golden Mall in Burbank, 1967, were more short-lived. After only 20 years, most of the Golden Mall was removed and converted back to a street to revive the businesses.

The Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica is one of the 1960's era downtown mall conversions that has prevailed. The former street was converted to a 3 block pedestrian-only outdoor mall in 1965. The project was not successful and by the late 1970's had become rundown. In the 1980's the mall was redesigned, parking structures were added, and it was re-branded and opened as the Third Street Promenade in 1989. This second version of the mall was successful, especially in its first decade of the 1990's. The City of Santa Monica is now planning a third redesign of the project, called Promenade 3.0. The City has budgeted \$45-60 million for this new refurbishment, or \$15-20 million per block.

My reason for getting involved in this project is so that we, as the public and the business community, understand that closing off our most beautiful and successful [and highest rent] commercial block in town is a huge decision with possible unforeseen consequences. This project could be successful for businesses, or it might not be....for many different reasons....just like all the other downtown street closures initiated in the 1960's that opened with high hopes and expectations. We should ask ourselves: "What is the long term objective for the lower Forest block, and what is the problem we are trying to fix by closing it off permanently?"

I have worked on some controversial public projects such as the downtown Avalon Urban Design Plan on Catalina Island, and the San Clemente Beach Trail. Both of these projects are pedestrian-only, and both have received awards. To me, the best and most successful projects are the ones that are carefully considered with input from all sides, to achieve a solution that is a win-win for everybody... such as our recent downtown theater renovation agreement. After spending time on the street and speaking to some of the business owners, there are very strong and divergent opinions about what the objectives for lower Forest should be. I hope that everyone can step back and listen to all points of view to achieve consensus on an overall goal and purpose, before any designs are drawn.

Thank you.